

Retrieving and (Re-reading) My Teenage On-line Diaries: A Feminist Study of a Young Girl's Passage into Identity Construction

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Abstract

“Archive is the complex and incomplete site of women’s knowledge” (Carr, 2001: 1). Joining the MA program in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies in mid-2015 and having taken courses related to the issues of women, history and archives has brought me to a (very familiar but) forgotten chapter of my life; that is, the digitalized diary of my teenage (and younger woman) years (2005-2009). In this study the 103 entries of my online diary published on “yenta4.com” (which has recently been closed) will be retrieved and elaborated upon through the framework and practice of “autoethnography” as discussed by Ellis (2000), Dent (2002) and others. It will reflect the passage of a rural teenager in various ways such as struggling to adjust her life in a very large and complex capital city, dealing with the hardship of study at the high school level and above all learning about one's sexuality through relationships with loving friends of the opposite gender. As the issues of “Girl Studies” by the girl’s (own) voice from a feminist perspective is rarely touched upon in the academic circles of Women’s Studies in Thailand, this research aims to open up, contribute and strengthen the body of knowledge in this area.

Keywords: *girl's writing, girlhood construction, online diaries, digital archive, autoethnography, girl's culture, identity construction*

1. Introduction

This paper aims to study a girl identity construction from online diaries archive. I inspire for this work from re-reading my own teenage diaries that wrote in the same period with the online diaries expanding in Thailand during the year 2002-2007. It’s the time that I studied about online diaries in Thailand which appear in many disciplines such as linguistics, communication art and computer science. This wave of online diary studies spectacular imply attentiveness of Thai society, aspect that online diary can affect social dynamic or maybe make a problem in Thai youth life. I didn’t found any studies after the year 2007 even if diary online websites still provide service. Decade after this stream in the year 2015 as a Woman, Gender and Sexuality Studies student I pick my online diaries to read again through feminist perspective as an area contain knowledge of girlhood that never stand in the center of studies.

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I joined the MA program in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies in 2015. It is the first time I learned that an object or a document of people or family can tell us more than what it looks like or its purpose. Those objects are the story of the owners and the people who involve the objects. I tried to read objects or documents that my lecturer took as archives. She used them as examples through feminist perspective. I see that things in daily life such as a scarf or a government document; birth certificate, identity card or house registration that everyone has can tell a specific story. It can give wider and deeper meaning and look more lively than what we see. The next semester, I was more impressed when I studied Women's History and Feminist Analysis course that the lecturer assigned task to each student. The students had to bring their archive in the house and present it to their friends. At first I thought of a small notebook with mint green cover. I used to copy the statements I like from some books and record important events during my lower level secondary. I tried to look for that notebook, but I could not find it. Thus, I turned to different paper boxes and document files in my house, after particular selecting I chose my teenage online diary to the class.

Online Diary is the media which includes three features : diary, web board and chat room. Each user will write a memo about their private story to express good and bad experience in her or his life such as love story, ordinary story then reread her or his mistake and write a secret that is not a top-secret (Kuprasert, 2008). I started to keep my online diary because of Pueng, a girl older than me who I met in my loving friend's school web board. She told me that "keeping diary can help you relieve your stresses." I count her 'my real friend from the internet world.' I have 103 entries published on online diary website, called Yenta4.com. The printed online diaries that became the stack of papers were written when I was 16 to 18 years old, studying in grade 11 to the 1st year at a university.

I presented my diaries to my lecturer and my friends. I told them about the background of my writing. The time that I was interested in creating an online diary account is in the summer before I started grade 11 at high school. It was the time I moved from my grandmother's house in Bangkok suburb to a dormitory because she did not want me to get up too early to go to school even if going to bed very late as a result of hard study. It was my first time that I lived with unfamiliar people since I came from Aranyaprathet District, a district in Eastern Thailand, to Bangkok Metropolis (4 hours from Bangkok by bus) and it was the time I learned to have a boyfriend. I had to be separated from my classmates that I was just familiar last semester because of classroom adjusting and I tried to cut my internet using hour to

concentrate on university admission preparation. At the end of the day, inspiration from the class engulfed my archive loving mind. I saw my friends bringing a child's toy, a paper doll, a thing used in parents' Chinese wedding ceremony as well as an old letter the mother wrote, but did not send. The stories of archives and my friends who told the stories made me promise that "I will do something useful from my online diaries" and now it turns into paper on 'girl's studies', my girlhood study.

2. Research Methodology

The first time I tried to read the text of my online diary in the frame of girl's sexuality construction since I started the diary because of a suggestion of a girl from pre-cadet's girlfriends circle. At that time my experimental boyfriend studied in pre-cadet school and my friends at the same school were no idea about a boy in this type. Karen Nairn who is a co-researcher in the article (Re) performing emotions in diary-interviews told me that I should try to use discourse analysis as a tool for my research and read her paper. She also uses this tool for analyze the text from woman's diary in diary-interview method in the same study *for understanding the fluid and complex nature of emotions and subjectivities* (Spowart, L. & Nairn, K.,2013) of research participant she works with. In the article she uses woman's diary to reduce the researcher's power who may translate and analysis the interview incorrectly.

I tried to read and underlined the substance that indicated being influenced by a boyfriend. He seemed to be the first boy I learned to get a boyfriend. To be in the framework of Gender and Sexuality Studies and link it with a girl's using time. However, I found that using only discourse analysis method turned me to feel like reading the other's text and was separated from my story. So I include, "autoethnography" to my framework by retrieving my narrative like using interview method in diary-interviews but interview myself while looking back to analyze my narrative, which conform to the way using field note in autoethnography method that

the advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside of it to analyze from a cultural perspective. That's why it's good to write about an event while your feeling are still intense, and then to go back to it when you're emotionally distant.(Ellis,2000)

In this way my online diary can be a field note.

I find that at the end of each entry I always talked about my family and encouraged myself by thinking of my father's teaching and promised myself not to disappoint my family. Now I think the scope of my online diaries' study may not limit in the topic about a girl's sexual identity construction anymore, but intend for girl's identity construction topic that shows passages of a rural teenager in various ways such as struggling to adjust her life in a very large and complex capital city. Even if she moved to this city for education, but other factors such as transition from young to teenage life, trying to have a boyfriend, feeling like being the other while studying in a famous high school of the country not only the difference of education and culture as a rural girl but also the notion that nobody understands me like Anne Frank said that "*I do not want anyone to read my diary except when I have a real friend. That is why I write my diary, I do not have a real friend to talk to.*" (Frank, 1999)

I searched for feminist study about girlhood in Thailand but found nothing. Studies about girls in Thailand usually study from the perspective that treats girls as an object of study or a problem that various organization must interfere to help and solve, such as *Female Adolescents and Smoking : A Study of Female Students of Vocational School in Bangkok*, *Factors relating juvenile ravishers : a case study of Juvenile Training Centers in Bangkok Metropolitan area*, *The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Coping Behaviors of Juvenile Delinquents in the Observation and Protection Centers in Bangkok*. Though some existing studies about girls do not mention to girls in direct way, but in a topic or problem they often point to girls as a cause of the problem, just because they don't fit in a norm of "good girls." Then autoethnography is a very important research method to reveal diversity of girl's knowledge that has been suppressed from the studies that represent girls in stereotype. I inspired from former girls' study researcher, bell hooks who said that "*To understand the complexity of Black girlhood we need more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity. It's vital then that we hear about our diverse experience.*" (hooks, 1996) as girl's studies in Thailand I think, it should have more diversity of girls' studies and girls' stories release to public.

3. Findings and Discussion

- a. *Reading Border Crossing: A story of sexual Identity Transformation by Beverley Dent.*

She wrote about the important changing point in her life, the sexual transformation. She changed both sex and gender that cannot revert. She described the time when she travelled to the hospital to get an operation, while she stayed at the hospital and when she returned home, then she reflected on her old images of her past life and the relationship with people around her. When I read *Border Crossing* I love her writing style that was like poetry. What impresses me and makes me have a question is how she wrote her life story that reveal life story of a person who has sexual transformation. She described the feeling and gave details clearly. Although the text is not connected to me her writing helps me understand about the identity construction of a transgender and transsexual person.

When I work with my own diary I find that I don't remember many things I wrote in the diary or they were forgotten for a long time, when I read it again it can remind me of other things I never wrote. It is the same as when I read other people's autoethnography writing or autobiographphy writing, I have co-experience and co-feeling like reading *Bone Black*, I started to read it nearly at the same time I wrote this article. Reading *Bone Black* made me think of the time when I read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and *A room of one's own* by Virginia Woolf, the time that I reviewed literature in my Thesis Seminar last semester. At that time I felt that I liked anything the writer thought, I nodded while I was reading alone and copied out several statements I liked. I felt I wanted to tell my own story by writing like *Bone Black* by bell hooks. I looked back on an insignificant story of a girl who could not join a sibling group because she did not use a hot comb, her hair was not curly. This story made me think of lower secondary age when my friends and I used hair straightener or first underarm hair shaving in order to dress a New Year Dance costume at a dormitory party. We also changed a friendship book when I was in grade 9 before moving to a new high school. A friendship book is one of fields to practice my writing before I have my online diary. I faced many important girl cultures that shape my identity before I create this online diary.

3.2 Retrieving and (Re-reading) My Teenage Online Diaries

I use the framework autoethnography to retrieve and discourse analysis to analyze a passage when I reread my girlhood diaries. My question is what passage I should select to this study. I have 103 entries that contain the stories about my friend, my family, my boyfriend, my study, my hobbies, etc. After working with my online diary for one semester, I realize that autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple

layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.(Ellis, 2000) the point I am interested in is that after reading the text in each entry I find myself gave much importance to writing. I always gave details about preparation before publishing the diary, for example:

At 10 a.m. I will update my diary but I cannot, I don't know why...when I will save it, it tells me that please fill in your information completely. I am confused...I'm sure I filled all the information. So I waste time, I get nothing...At 11a.m. join extra class [...] Today, I run out of time. (Because a good younger sister should let her older sister use computer too) (from my online diary March 28, 2005)

When I chose the area to write online diaries I had to face a lot of different difficulties. It because of the place where I lived, I started writing a diary at home during my holiday in 2005. There are four people in my family, my father, my mother, my older sister and I. My mother and my father are a teacher at a secondary school not far from my house. My family had only one computer, it was in a living room so we had to use a shared family computer. My sister and I used the computer most of the time so I had a limited time for my writing. If I worked on computer until late at night, I must be warned by someone who woke up to drink water in the kitchen that is next to the living room.

I have read my online diary several times, due to the fact that it is the online diary, I am not sure if I should analyze the public and private points. However, when I read it the last time I felt that although online diary is public that everyone can access, it is a place where I can express my identity and what I think by using letters and pictures. At that time I was worried about the followers, I was afraid that friends who talked to me in my cyber world would disappear. I was also worried about censoring some text that related to some people. In fact, I realize that the main purpose of writing online diary was for myself. I thought and talked to myself as if I was two people. The other person reflected how I was and at the same time I was responded by people I did not know. I chose to talk to people who were really interested in my stories depending on the levels of their interest like friends in my daily life.

I used my friends' real name when I told a story, I never abbreviated their name like Anne Frank. I expressed different opinions more frankly than nowadays. I used a pseudonym for only the people I secretly liked, I sometimes used the pronoun "you" for them. I created privacy I wanted when I wrote a short story or a novel, I used the pronoun "Phom"(IHe) for myself in spite of the fact that I was a girl that often made my readers confused. I used to write about using pronouns in my diary as follows:

Is it strange for a person who writes a diary if [he/she] uses so many different pronouns that the readers are confused? Each person has [his/her] own style in writing, [he/she] may borrow a person to tell your stories as a representative, depending on the situations. Sometimes telling [your] own story while expressing [your] own opinions seems as if [you] are on [your] own side, it is not a good idea. However, if [you] express [your] opinions through an unreal person's perspective, who will dare to blame and who will be blamed? (from my online diary November 5, 2005)

I feel that this case shows a girl's timidity clearly, she dared not to reveal or told her story directly. Here, I avoided telling readers that it was my own story to prevent myself from judgement. That made me feel more comfortable telling my story.

A cause of pressure in the time I wrote the diaries is partly a pressure to adjust the way to live and study in high school since I moved from rural city to a big and complex capital city. That time I couldn't aware an inequality of education in my country. I know my family just attempted to send me to this school and I stand in the top famous high school of Thailand so I must try my best for my parents. However, there is more pressure such as a boyfriend who came with a discourse like "a girl should not call a boy" so I was anxious waiting for his telephone call.

3.3 March 3, 2005

Yesterday, he called me to tell his gorgeous grade from the last exam. He got 3.91, didn't reach 4.00, but many more decimal than me. He got all A except maths B+. Great! Great! Last semester he got only 0.01 more than me, but this semester very far from mine. So this is a serious reason that I want to tell everyone, from now on I will try to develop myself ... better allocate...use my time wisely. Remember it! "While I spent time playing the internet uselessly, how many pages that other people read their book?", said my father. Your satisfying event I heard yesterday is a good momentum that made me improve myself rapidly.

The above passage shows my attempt to maintain an identity of "good girl" and "hard-working girl" that a desirable quality define and instruct by male and father on behalf of family. At that time I used the pressure to construct my inner strength and wrote on my diary like a

promise to myself. In addition, I wrote some displeasure with my boyfriend, because of different taste and lifestyle that...

3.4 April 25, 2005

I'm not completely understand about myself why sometimes I am eager to talk with you, but sometimes I'm not really pleased when you call me. Why?...Ok. I will tell you!, because of the story we dialogued...not yet...the story you talked to me sometimes it's like a two of sets that don't have any member intersect... Easily that the topics you talked sometimes are not my interesting things. I don't know if my feeling is too aggressive, but I can understand and forgive you because I keep the thought that a person who calls me will have a story to talk to me. So each time you call me I will let you free... free to talk... talk everything you want. If you feel utterly repressed or have an opinion to tell I am always ready for you, but it will be better if you think about my self and my mind.

At that time, I silenced my voice and left myself to maintain a relationship with my first loving friend. I looked to my practice as sacrifice and felt uncomfortable to spend my own time to listen unwanted passage in the same time, but I dare not to tell him. It is one of hardships of girlhood that I was constructed to depend on boy's or male's want follow the good girl discourse that will be an obedient and supporting girl. However, even I feel frustrated from male gender or social construction I will write and draw my feeling and emotions through the diary and I can pass the difficult situation.

4. Conclusions

A girl study in feminist perspective is a double marginal study, from male perspective study and from woman study too. In this article I try to write knowledge about a girl from her own experience, my own experience and a girl's study that a girl is the subject and the center of the study. This girl's study crosses my online diary: my girlhood digital archives as a field note that takes me to recollect each event in my girlhood transition. This study expands the viewpoint in girl's study, gets free from a study with judgement view that look at girls as weakling or social problem, you must listen her own voice. Moreover, a middle-class girl who has ordinary daily life, goes to school every day, has her problem and her own solution too.

Like in this study, I treat my online diary not only a field note but also a tool to construct my identity and help me overcome obstacles. When it walks with autoethnography research method it reveals and understands my identity from family, school and social construction.

The most important thing for my diary study, it is not analysis all the text but it is remembering the importance of a girl's writing that reflects through the text. The more the text reflects the stress and pressure on me, the more writing diary is important for my life and my identity. Each time when I wrote I defined myself, removed and rebuilt in the way of remedy. Many times when I could not do what I expected diary writing was the return, I started talking to and comforted myself so that my life could step forward.

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